

DOK LEIPZIG
INTERNATIONALER
WETTBEWERB
2018

IOTA PRODUCTION PRESENTS

lettre à Théo

LETTER TO THEO

A FILM BY
ELODIE LELU

P R E S S K I T

63 MIN, BELGIUM, 2018

HD COLOR 16/9

OV FRENCH, GREEK, ENGLISH, DARI

SUBTITLES : FRENCH, ENGLISH, GREEK

SYNOPSIS

Filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos died on January 24th, 2012, knocked down by a motorcycle on the set of his last film *The Other Sea*. He was surrounded by his whole crew, of which I was part.

In that film, unfinished to this day, Theo talked about the tragic destinies of the victims of the Greek crisis. He felt very close to them.

Ironically, the ambulances that should have come to his rescue that evening broke down, new budgetary restrictions having made it impossible to maintain their vehicles properly.

How tragic that Theo's death was, in part, so closely linked to the subject of his film: the crisis.

Letter to Theo is a film I address to my friend, the filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos.

After the accident that took him from us, I return to Greece and speak to him about his country, to which he introduced me. Every street corner holds a memory. Every façade is a reminder of his commitment, still so topical. Behind each figure, the evanescent presence of the characters in his films, always lost between several identities.

By creating a dialogue between my present-day images and those of Theo Angelopoulos' films I will show what a visionary he was. He, before anyone else, felt the coming of the major economic and migration crises.

In this Greece, scarred by one misery after another, I film the organization of resistance and the rising solidarity that tries to restore a little dignity to those who have lost theirs.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW OF ÉLODIE LÉLU BY LAURE REBOIS,
JOURNALIST FOR MAGAZINES LITTÉRAIRES.

L.R.: You knew Theo Angelopoulos well. How did you meet him?

E.L.: I was 21 at the time. At that age, you tend to be rather unconscious and idealistic, which makes you bold. Anyway, at that period of my life, I was very frustrated. I wanted to make films and I had just failed the entrance exam for the INSAS (a cinema school in Brussels). So I ended up at Sorbonne University. There, I felt completely cut off from cinema. The only times I reconnected with that world were when I read interviews of directors talking about their filmmaking experiences. When the time came to choose a subject for my thesis, the only thing I wanted to do was work on a living filmmaker so that I could meet him. At the same

time, I discovered *Ulysses' Gaze* by Theo Angelopoulos during a retrospective on Greek cinema.

I left the screening totally stunned and started to do research about him. I realized that he had lived in France and that he spoke fluent French. I took that as a sign. I called the Centre for Greek Cinema, claiming to be a journalist and was given his contact details. Of course, when I called Theo, I told him the truth, that I was just a young student interested in his films. Theo was very welcoming. He immediately suggested that I come to Athens to meet him. He would give me access to his personal library. I gave myself three months to see all his films and read everything that had been written about his work.

L.R.: Was it easy to find his films? Because I think they were transferred to DVD very late on. By Agnès B, in fact.

E.L.: It was quite an adventure! Actually, it was Theo's fault. He refused to have his films distributed on DVD because he felt the quality of the image was not good enough. Back then I was lucky enough to be helped by a university teacher, Sylvie Rollet, a specialist on Theo's work. She had practically all his films on VHS. She took the time to copy them for me. I watched those tapes so many times that I ended up breaking some of them. Some were in Greek and not subtitled, *The Travelling Players*, for example. So I watched that film with an Avant-

Scène (monthly review devoted to important films in the history of cinema) on my lap and pausing the film every two minutes. It's a long film anyway (almost four hours), but it must have taken me seven hours to see it (laughter).

L.R.: Didn't all these obstacles discourage you?

E.L.: No. There was something about his films that fascinated me. More than his particular use of the sequence shot, which naturally impressed me, I understood quite late on that it was his relationship to time that really appealed to me; the idea that the past is never past, that it is still present, the intuition that by looking to the past one is better able

to see the future. That's truly the way he saw the world and I think that's precisely why he is considered to be a prophetic filmmaker.

L.R.: How was your first meeting? You must have been nervous to meet such a great director...

E.L.: Things got off to a bad start. We had set up a meeting in Greece. I made the journey, but when I got to his office, I was told he had left the country. I was very disappointed, I thought about going home. But in the end, for a reason that escapes me now, I decided to wait for him. I wandered around Athens for days. I didn't know the city. I regularly passed in front of his office; the shutter was always down. In the end, I got to know the neighbourhood, Exarquia, well. It is mainly populated by young anarchists and artists. I was very surprised that a great director like him had chosen to settle in a place like that. Exarquia has always been a hotbed of protest. All demonstrations set off from there, and clashes with the police are frequent. But it was indeed the place from where Theo watched the world. Finally, after long days of waiting, the shutter to his office was raised. I rang the bell and, another disappointment, Theo was in a hurry, he had no time to talk to me. Ironically, the cinematographer of time had no time. Still, I stuck to the questions that I had prepared and that's when the real meeting took

place. What exactly happened? I have often wondered about that. I think that I reminded Theo of his years studying in Paris. Whatever the case may be, he brought out a reel of 35 mm film and set it up on the Steenbeck editing table. It was the start of *The Travelling Players*. I was very moved, as if by this gesture Theo was opening the doors to his creation for me. He suggested we meet again the next day to continue our discussion. Before we went our separate ways, he told me I could call him whenever I wanted, that he was there to help me. On the plane home, I had the intuition that this meeting would transform my life.

L.R.: Did you see each other often?

E.L.: Theo was amazing. He was one of those directors who go to conferences and retrospectives of his films. As I started to write about his films, we often met up at these conferences, once even in Finland. And I did internships with him. In the end, our relationship became friendly, or rather filial. Theo welcomed me into his family, introduced me to his wife Phoebe and their daughters and he even met my parents during a stay in Brittany. I will never forget their faces when I told them that Theo and his wife were coming for dinner (laughter). I so loved talking to Theo. He had such a subtle and original take on current events. He had a unique clarity of thought that sometimes

led to a form of melancholy, for he, like others of his generation, had dreamed of a better world.

L.R.: Did he allow you to film him over those years?

E.L.: At first, I recorded his voice on sometimes catastrophic media such as those minicassettes that you had to rewind with a pencil. Then I filmed him with small cameras – it was the early days of digital – until I directed a filmed interview of him in professional conditions. I had a team come to Greece in summer because I knew that Theo was not filming during that time of the year: he always filmed grey, cloudy skies. And there, in his house by the sea in Mati which was later totally destroyed in a terrible fire, we shut

ourselves up in his office, and in semi-darkness, out of the sun, Theo confided in me as he would do in our conversations. I called these interviews *The Internal Journey* and they were often screened alongside

projections of his films. Theo liked them. I know he recognised himself in them, even though they are very classical interviews.

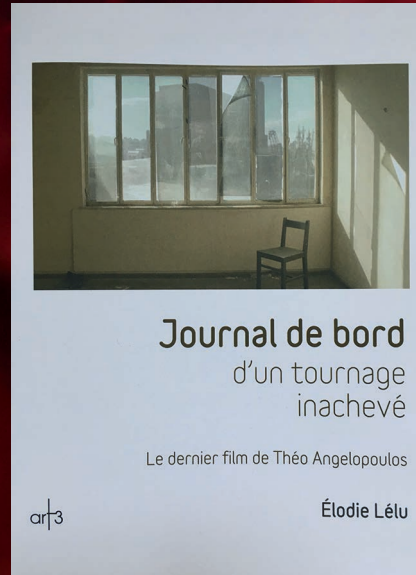
L.R.: But deep down, what you really wanted was to work with him?

E.L.: Yes, of course, I dreamed of it. He had suggested I join him on *The Dust of Time*, but it was a very complicated shoot, split between several cities, from Berlin to the remote areas of Kazakhstan. For the third film of the trilogy, *The Other Sea*

trilogy, which was mainly filmed in Greece, it was much easier for me to join him. So when preparation began, I dropped everything and went there to make this old dream come true.

L.R.: What did you do on the shoot?

E.L.: By then, I had finished my studies at INSAS. I had some experience, both as director and on the production side. As Theo was in dire financial straits for his film, I tried to set up a co-production with Belgium, but it didn't work out. The timelines were too short. I was also there working on a book project. A publisher had asked me to do a book about Theo. I didn't know precisely what form it would take, so as I figured it out, I started taking notes and writing a sort of diary of the filming. This finally became the book. Theo wanted to help me, so he often set me up in a privileged spot on the set so I could be close to the creative process. I was staying with him and his family during this period and he would share his doubts and worries with me, after or before the shoot. This book was recently published with Éditions Art 3 Plessis, under the title: *Journal de bord d'un tournage inachevé* (*Diary of an Unfinished Film*). In the end, it is the only remaining trace of that film. I had to have it published, for Theo, for all that he had taught me and given me over the years.



L.R.: How did the shoot go?

E.L.: Nothing went according to plan on this film. Firstly, we didn't have a cent to produce it. In 2011, the crisis was at its peak. Theo had lost his Greek subsidies and his co-producers couldn't raise enough funding. In short, the film was impossible to produce. But Theo wanted to make it, at all costs. He felt an urgent need to finish the trilogy he had started in 2001 and to do so, he was ready to do anything. He managed to convince the great Toni Servillo to make this film and gathered a small team around him, composed of "die-hards", his long-time collaborators, and inexperienced youngsters who were willing to engage with him out of love for his


films. There was a good energy in that team, but the situation just kept getting worse.

L.R.: Up until the tragic end of the shoot with Theo's accident. How do you think things reached that point?

E.L.: The lack of money, his hurry to shoot, his doubts, the fact that he wasn't ready, he couldn't completely visualize his film... Now, with hindsight, I also think that things were too close to reality. Theo staged the crisis, the riots, so well that the police would turn up on set, convinced that real riots were going on. In a way, I think we got lost between fiction and reality. Seen from France or Belgium, it's impossible to judge the impact of the Greek crisis. And it's not over as they would have us believe. It is incredibly violent, an underlying violence that is not visible. It has caused a complete breakdown of the health system. During that shoot I realised that if anything happened to me, I wouldn't be able to get the required help or care. As fate would have it, Theo was the one who needed help.

L.R.: His disappearance must have been a terrible shock for you. How did you manage to get back into your book after this tragedy?

E.L.: Theo's disappearance was a traumatic shock for his family and long-time collaborators. I only knew



Theo for seven years. The others had a life-long connection with him. But yes, I had lost my "film father". It took me many months to get back to my diary. The biggest job was cutting stuff out. I had way too many pages; I often lost myself in insignificant details. So I cut it back trying to remain as faithful as I could to the original text. I kept some clumsiness, but also some critical notions about Theo. I think that the affirmation of this subjective point of view, the sharing of disappointments and anger, are fundamental elements of the book. I am aware that I take away some of the magic of the shoot, but I did not want to settle into a sort of passive fascination.

L.R.: Do you ever wonder what Theo would have thought of this book?

E.L.: Theo loved confrontation. He wanted people to push back at him, play devil's advocate. That's how he progressed in his work. I think the critical side of my book would have pleased him. He would probably have been a little surprised by some passages, but in the end, I am convinced he would have supported the book. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it.

L.R.: And parallel to the book, you are starting work on a new film about Theo, *Letter to Theo*, which is even more intimate. Why did you feel this was necessary?

E.L.: The book is a sort of literary 'making of' of the unfinished film whereas my documentary is more of a pilgrimage, a sort of reverse *Letter to a Young Poet* where I go back over what Theo taught me, the questionings he handed down

to me. The world carries on without him and yet his films continue to be relevant today: they are disconcertingly topical. In my documentary, I explore the prophetic side of Theo's

films. I seek connections between his world and ours and, in a way, I try to make him present, bring him back to life. Anyone close to Theo will tell you: they have this strange sensation that he is still here, that he will pop up behind a street corner and

take us on a shoot. The very way the film is constructed is a sort of reincarnation, not in the biblical but in the philosophical sense: at the end of the film, I meet with him; Theo is

well and truly present and he opens his heart. Of course, it's all to do with his conception of time, with the fact that the past is never past, but always present.

L.R.: Why a letter?

E.L.: Theo loved letters. There are several in his films, be it in *Landscape in the Mist* where the children write imaginary letters to their father, or in *The Weeping Meadow*, when Eleni writes to her husband in the States, or in *Eternity and a Day*, punctuated by love letters. But the letters are never delivered or are read too late. Letters always have a painful destiny in Theo's films, so I thought: "Why not write to someone who is no longer here?"

L.R.: But in your letter, Theo is there, he even answers.

E.R.: Let's just say I'm not as melancholy as Theo (laughter). I wanted this to be a letter of reunion. I had hours of recordings of his voice. I really could have him answer me. All this material accumulated over the years has made it possible for me to place Theo's voice, the tone and rhythm of it, in the documentary.

L.R.: The letter is not read by you but by the actress Irene Jacob. Why this choice?

E.L.: At first, I recorded my own voice, but I found it too direct, not

poetic enough. And I needed to stand back, to bring the film into the realm of fiction. Irene is the last actress Theo filmed. I have always been a huge fan of hers, she's part of why I wanted to be involved in cinema. I decided to become a director when I saw *The Double Life of Veronique*. It made a lot of sense for her to read the letter. Besides, Irene is a marvellous actress, very sensitive. She managed to find just the right tone and bring the film to life. She also gave the impression that the letter is being written as she speaks it.

L.R.: So Irene's voice connects all the heterogeneous image and sound material that you use. How did you choose the extracts from Theo's films?

E.L.: The extracts are an integral part of the story I tell: that of returning to Greece in Theo's footsteps. So I chose to open my documentary with *Ulysses' Gaze*, the sequence where Harvey Keitel goes looking for reels of lost films. That resonated directly with my quest. So I didn't try to show Theo's most beautiful shots but to tell a story based on his world and on my return to Greece. The main stake for editor Philippe Boucq and I was to create connections between fiction and reality to show just how prophetic Theo's vision is. It is disturbing to think that in 2011, not only did he anticipate the huge migration crisis of 2015 – 2016,

but that he was shooting precisely where it would occur. His fiction clearly became reality and that's what my documentary highlights.

L.R.: You give a pretty unexpected portrayal of Greece, far from what one would imagine, and you do not hesitate to shoot almost conceptual images... I'm speaking of sequences where you have characters disappear into the image. Why suddenly use these totally staged representations?

E.L.: I don't think that realistic representation gives you a clear view of the world. On the contrary, moving away, stepping back makes emotion feel very real. So often, when I write the film, I start with a feeling and wonder how I can share it. During location seeking, I got the painful impression that much of Greek society – by this I mean the victims of the crisis and the migrants – was being forgotten, even erased. How could I convey this feeling visually? How could I bring this shadowy realm visible? I immediately thought of the camouflage work of photographer Bence Bakonyi and wanted to do animated representations of these disappearances. Cameraman, Tristan Galand and I staged a set-up that is quite close to fiction, using extras with costumes chosen according to the colour of the backdrops. We filmed in visual strata. During editing, we superimposed

the images and added fades, thus showing the process of erasure. Such sequences are always worrisome because they take time to set up and you can never be sure if it will be possible to integrate them into the rest of the film. But when you believe in an idea and work on it, in general, it pays off.

L.R.: There are other difficult shots that you really wanted in your film. I'm referring to the long tracking shots that are usually found in action films.

E.L.: I couldn't imagine a documentary about Theo Angelopoulos without tracking shots. The essence of his cinema is watching the world as it moves forward. That is what he taught me and that's what I wanted to share with viewers. But a tracking shot has many forms and I wanted to distinguish mine from Theo's. In my film, the camera movements are the expression of a quest and I wanted something that floats, something almost ghost-like. The shoulder camera or Steadicam are too physical and the traditional tracking shot on rails, is not suitable for where we were filming. Tristan Galand had the idea of using a Ronin stabiliser. With this method, we placed the camera in a double metallic structure with little engines that compensated for the vibrations caused by movement. The result is surprising: the camera seems to

float, as if weightless. Even though the shooting equipment is a little cumbersome, we did most of our tracking shots this way.

L.R.: I imagine that the choice of shooting method has an impact on how one is accepted. How did you manage to slip in among the queue of migrants asking for asylum?

E.L.: First off, I was lucky to obtain shooting authorizations. It was no easy task. I have known members of the Asylum Service for several years. They work in very difficult conditions with very few resources. They are short of everything: translators, offices, staff... Psychologically, it is very hard for them to know that they can only deal with a tiny portion of the people who queue up each morning. I wanted to film the migrants' wait, which is the metaphor for the hell they go through. So we went to film very early one morning and waited with them for hours, until day broke and the doors opened. In the end, the camera was accepted. It snowed that day, which is exceptionally rare in Athens. We had a strong sense of being in one of Theo's films, with the cold light and the snowflakes falling on the dark coats. The children started to play in the snow, briefly escaping the misery of the wait.

L.R.: The scene with the merry-go-round is pretty surprising. One doesn't expect such violence. It

brings to mind *L'Enfant des manèges* (*The Merry-go-round Child*) by Andrée Chédid.

E.L.: During preparation for the film, I came across many migrant children. Most people risk crossing the ocean for their children, not for themselves. I saw in the eyes of those children that they had lost part of their childhood. For several weeks I wondered how to convey the war trauma they carried deep within. I was lucky to be surrounded by a crew that was very involved on an artistic level. Félix Blume, the sound engineer, sent me recordings of fireworks slowed down 8x. As I listened to them, I felt I was being plunged into the heart of a war. I therefore built the whole sequence around this sound, filming the merry-go-round until the children gradually left and it stood empty. Tristan Galand spent hours on that merry-go-round, looking for a way to visually convey the traumatic spiral of memory. In the end, he shifted the lenses away from the camera to get this result.

L.R.: Was much of the image and sound work done separately?

E.L.: Yes, most of the film is asynchronous. I love working on sound, especially when it is not realistic. Actually, I think I drove my editor a little crazy, especially for the sequence in the archaeological

museum. A little like a scenographer who starts with black, my editor had to start with silence and build the sound environment for some sequences. Sound is much more violent than images. In a documentary like mine, which deals with migration and crisis, it naturally plays a central role.

L.R.: And yet, there are some perfectly synchronous moments, at the end, with the migrants' Greek lesson.

E.L.: The film passes from an asynchronous world, where image and sound do not match, to a synchronous world where communication, point of view and speech do match. It marks a sort of peace, of reconciliation between oneself and the world. The Greek lesson we filmed was a magical moment in the making of the film. Amalia, the teacher, was a willing participant in the project. She prepared her pupils, built her lesson around the broad themes of the film. She did such a good job that when we arrived to film, the camera was immediately accepted. It was a moment of communion during which this foreign language that the migrants were learning, Greek, became the link. We absolutely had to stay synchronous to film and record the integration as it was occurring. It is perhaps here that the film breaks free of Theo, that it goes

further and leaves him behind in a way. Theo did not have much hope at the end of his life, whereas my film ends on a positive note, which is reinforced by the apparition of Theo, synchronous, on screen... thus embodied so to speak.

L.R.: It must have been a painful moment for you when you returned to the scene of the accident.

E.L.: Actually, I didn't manage to film that place. I did go back, of course, I did some shots during location seeking, but they didn't express what I was feeling. Yet I had to talk of Theo's disappearance in the film. One day during location seeking, when I was filming images of the port out of the car window, we passed the place where the accident happened. Just before it, there is a long tunnel. I left the camera on by accident and that evening, as I looked at the images, I saw these tags flashing past, which seemed to be written and erased to the rhythm of the car headlamps. It reminded me of the anguish, the descent into hell, the crew and I felt that evening. In the end, these images filmed by mistake formed the basis of the sequence that I filmed again later. That's part of the strength of documentary, integrating the unexpected in life and turning it into material for a film.

LETTER TO THEO

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PRODUCED BY IOTA PRODUCTION (ISABELLE TRUC)

IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH BLONDE, LE WIP, LA ERT

WITH THE SUPPORT OF MÉDIA DÉVELOPPEMENT,

LE CENTRE DU CINÉMA DE LA FÉDÉRATION WALLONIE BRUXELLES,

TAXSHELTER.BE AND ING (THE TAX SHELTER OF THE BELGIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT)

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